

## THE RISK OF PHALLOCENTRISM IN MASCULINITIES STUDIES: HOW A REVISION OF THE CONCEPT OF PATRIARCHY MAY HELP

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### Abstract.

*In this article I critique South African work on masculinities through a fine grained reading of Morrell's introductions to three texts. While this work appears, on first reading, to contribute to pro-feminist theorising, I argue that it inadvertently falls into a phallogentric trap. This is achieved in three ways: firstly, and most crudely, through conflating women and men into a singular, universal model that is in reality the masculine appearing as the universal; secondly, and more subtly, through concentrating almost exclusively on men and masculinities, thereby marginalising women (again); and thirdly, through constructing multiplicities of masculinities – this allows men to resist hegemonic masculinity, but never undo masculinity itself. In this way, the possibility of deconstructing the feminine/masculine binary recedes and the concept of patriarchy gets sidelined. I argue for a reinsertion of the notion of patriarchy into our study of gender, but also that the very notion of patriarchy needs revision in order to accommodate the multiple fissures that occur between men.*

**Key words:** masculinities studies, masculinity, feminism, phallogentrism, patriarchy

In the last decade or so there has been a burgeoning of literature on masculinity. A key word search for "masculinity" on PsycINFO for the decade 1987 to 1996 gets 530 hits, and for the decade 1997 to 2006, 1318. Of course, feminists have for a long time investigated issues relating to masculinity, unmasking its assumed normativity and indicating its construction within contested and contradictory power relations (Wiegman, 2001). It is only recently, however, that masculinity has become a topic in and of itself, masculinity qua masculinity.

There has also been substantial interest in masculinities research in South Africa in the last decade. Three texts, an edited book (**Changing men in southern Africa** published in 2001) and two special journal editions, **Agenda** (1998, Vol. 37) and **Journal of Southern African Studies** (1998, Vol. 24 No. 4), epitomise this move to the study of masculinities. The papers featured in these texts locate research and theory on masculinities within the local South African socio-historical context. Topics centre

around the body, guns, sport, violence, fatherhood, families, kinship, performing masculinity, identity, subcultural practices, work, leisure, travel, sexuality, race, homosexuality, and heterosexism. Post-colonial insights and the realities of Apartheid history are brought to bear on understandings of masculinities, with racial power relations and the multiplicities around identity construction being highlighted. Insights from South African historical and social science research, debates and theory are introduced into the study of masculinity.

In general, these texts have been well-received. For example, Epprecht (2002:395) talks of **Changing men in southern Africa** as a “timely and insightful collection”, and Luyt (2001:58) has “no hesitation in recommending its appearance on many bookshelves”. White (2002: 184/185) is somewhat more circumspect, calling the book an “ambitious project”, but complaining that “the desire to locate the work theoretically or methodologically often smothers the rich empirical and political possibilities of the material”.

Robert Morrell features as an important figure in each of the three texts. He wrote the introductions (Morrell, 1998a, 1998b, 2001) for all three and was instrumental in organising the Colloquium on Masculinities in Southern Africa at the then University of Natal from which the edited book and the **Journal of Southern African Studies** draw their articles. In this article I critique some of the South African work on masculinities through a fine-grained reading of these introductions. I have chosen these introductions specifically because, while they cannot be taken as representing all the work on masculinities in South Africa and while authors may differ from Morrell on certain points, they must, perforce, draw together the various strands of the contents of the book or special journal edition, locate the work within the international literature, and at the same time, put the author’s own stamp of interpretation on the work. As such, they are as close to representative of masculinities studies in South Africa as one could hope to get (I have chosen not to include the introduction to the edited book **African masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present** written by Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell as this extends the brief beyond South Africa – see review of this text by Gillian Eagle in this issue).

As Morrell (1998b) describes, there are a multiplicity of approaches evident in masculinities studies. What interests me here is the approach broadly labelled “pro-feminist”. “Pro-feminist” approaches recognise the power imbalances between men and women as well as inequities between men arising from the axes of “cultural”, sexual, class, age and racial differentiation. This research actively engages with feminist theories and methodologies (Skelton, 1998). Morrell, in the three introductions under discussion, fits into this category. His discussions interweave feminist theoretical understandings and political actions with insights from the major theorists in masculinities studies. His introduction in the feminist journal, **Agenda**, starts with the words “Men have a stake in gender transformation” (Morrell, 1998a:7) and goes on to state that “Fathers should encourage their sons to ... share household tasks with their sisters and mothers” (Morrell, 1998a:12). Rhetorically, Morrell contrasts “real men” and their ideals (they blame feminism for the difficulties men face and call for men to be assertive, decisive and take charge) with the “new man” and his ideals (a category in which Morrell is implicitly included, that is somebody who is “introspective, caring, anxious, outspoken on women’s rights, domestically responsible ... [has] turned his back on competitive sport, sexist jokes, violent outdoor pursuits” (Morrell, 1998a:7)).

Given the above, I start my discussion with a short interlude concerning men, masculinities studies and feminism. As a feminist scholar, I, of course, use very specific lenses to understand masculinities studies. This section, thus, sets the scene for my engagement with the texts under discussion. Following from this I present the main critique. I examine how phallogentrism may inadvertently be perpetuated in masculinities studies, how the potential for deconstructing the man/woman, masculine/feminine binaries recedes, and how the theoretical concept of patriarchy (which denotes relations of power) may get sidelined.

### **MEN, MASCULINITIES AND FEMINISM.**

While feminists have, to some extent, welcomed pro-feminist masculinities studies, concerns have also been raised. Commenting on pro-feminist masculinities studies and schooling in the United Kingdom, Skelton (1998) asserts that some of it sidesteps feminist concerns at the same time as paying lip-service to them. She questions the extent to which masculinities studies in this field (schooling) complements and informs feminist strategies for change. Robinson (2003) argues that certain forms of feminism, in particular radical feminism, have been caricatured and misrepresented. Nystrom (2002) posits that masculinities studies may make it seem that men and women are equally victimized. Furthermore, men do not necessarily rebel against patriarchal demands for the same reasons that women do. Their victories in these rebellions may not be victories for women as well.

In general, men's engagement with feminism has raised some interesting debates. Questions have been raised about the possibility of men acting against their own collective material interests, and pro-feminist men have been critiqued for presuming themselves to be innocent of blame, finding fault instead in a category of men that somehow excludes them (Douglas, 1994). Male feminism, according to Bersani (1995:120), risks "remaining an affair – yet another one – 'between men', attesting once again to the extraordinary difficulty men have not in speaking for women or through women to each other, but in addressing women". Adu-Poku (2001:157), however, points out that lumping "men" together in a uniform category is problematic as "race, ethnicity, class [and] sexuality ... crisscross the landscape of masculinities". He believes that he may appropriate his experience of "Otherness" to enable him to take on the position of a black male feminist.

The complexities referred to by Adu-Poku (2001) are certainly evident in South Africa, in which the gendered and racialised politics of knowledge production and praxis are contested domains. The academe has been and continues to be dominated by white males, a fact problematised by Duncan, van Niekerk, de la Rey and Seedat (2001) in *Psychology*. Some of these men have, however, contributed significantly to projects that have highlighted the racial, class and gender inequities endemic to South Africa. Zietkiewicz and Long (1999:147), in the special feature on South Africa of **Feminism & Psychology**, argue that we should have "less a politics organized exclusively around separate identities than a politics organized around specific issues, struggles, goals and broad democratic principles".

In line with the latter sentiment, my aim here is not to argue whether the possession of a penis (or one of a particular hue) allows or excludes a person from engaging in feminist politics. Rather, I wish to concentrate on how pro-feminist masculinities studies may

itself unwittingly undo some of its own intentions. My reading is, of necessity, based on my own engagement with feminist theory and debate (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002; Macleod, 2006). The broadly post-structuralist, postcolonialist feminism that I draw on in my work means that I much sympathy for the masculinities studies project as outlined by Morrell. Having said that, I believe that there are also inadvertent dangers. These are discussed below.

### **THE PHALLOCENTRIC TRAP.**

On my first reading of research in the texts listed at the beginning of this article, I found potential in the work as it highlights the socially constructed nature of masculinity and the power relations contingent on this construction, thereby making the normalised absent trace (the white, heterosexual, middle-class man) curious. As Renato (1993:81) so aptly puts it “male privilege can seem neuter with respect to gender, normal with respect to sexual orientation, fit with respect to health, adult with respect to age, traditionless with respect to ethnicity, colorless with respect to race, and odorless with respect to smell”. This invisibility reproduces inequality, as processes that confer privilege are often unseen to those upon whom the privilege is bestowed (Kimmel, 1993; West, 1994). Masculinities studies thus have the potential to undo the invisibility of gender to men, and, in doing so, assist in questioning the characteristics of the white, heterosexual, middle-class man as the golden standard towards which women, and other men, should aspire. As Morrell (1998a:8) puts it, “It [resistance to gender prejudices] cannot accept that ‘man’ is the marker and that ‘woman’ are [sic] trying to reach the mark”.

This initial promise of masculinities studies is overturned, however, by its tendency to inadvertently fall into the phallogentric man = human trap. This is achieved in three ways. This first is a simple conflating of women and men into a singular, universal model that in reality is the masculine appearing as the universal. This is a rare occurrence as the authors are, for the most part, careful in their language. The second is to concentrate almost exclusively on men and masculinity, and the third is by containing men’s subjectivity within the bounds of masculinity (be it complicit, rebellious, alternative etc.).

### **Conflating women and men into a singular, universal model.**

Morrell, in general, writes in a way that captures the complexities of gender, class, race, and location. His descriptions are rich and thought provoking. However, on minor occasions he slips into a simple phallogentric equation of man equals human. For example, in Morrell (1998b) he starts a section entitled “The youth” in the following manner: “Urbanisation disrupted the extended family even if it did not end it. Families were often disjointed and children roamed free, particularly before the advent of Bantu Education. The youth emerged as a new and anti-social force. Often they became tsotsis, petty criminals or gangsters. Mager’s article in this issue examines how the youth in East London developed new identities and new practices. While these reflected a recent rural past, a feature was increased levels of violence against one another and against women” (Morrell, 1998b:620). In this extract the “youth” are not specified. They are merely indicated as a generic category, as are the children referred to earlier. However, it becomes clear later on that the youth are in fact men. One could perhaps argue that the whole series is about men and therefore the assumption when one is talking of youth is that they are men. But does one assume that about the children as well? My point here is that by using the word “youth” instead of young men, Morrell slips

into the trap of simple phallocentrism. But, perhaps this is splitting hairs. What interests me more is the more subtle ways in which phallocentrism may be achieved in masculinities studies through concentrating on men and masculinity, and containing men's subjectivity within the bounds of masculinity (these will be discussed below).

### **Concentrating on men and masculinities.**

Schacht and Ewing (1997:161) argue that in masculinities studies "By almost exclusively focusing on men and their problems, women are, like in larger patriarchal realities, marginalized and ignored". Masculinities studies authors may argue that much feminist work has focussed on women only, and that therefore a focus on men is justified. This sentiment is reflected by Morrell (1998a:7): "Masculinities studies forced the restatement of gender understandings and relations to include men and women. ... Through this route masculinity became part of gender studies as an area of scholarship". While there certainly have been instances of the word "gender" being used to denote "women", it is inaccurate to intimate that feminists study women in isolation from their relation to men. In fact, given feminism's central thesis of gender power relations, this is frankly impossible, even when men are not participants in a study. Furthermore, while gender may be invisible to (white, heterosexual) men, it is never so for women who, to a large extent, are defined in terms of their relation to men. Thus, in performing gender work, focussing on women is not equivalent to focussing on men. Focus on women serves to foreground what has historically been relegated either to the absent trace or to the exocitised "other", while focus on men risks re-producing their status as the taken-for-granted.

Aware of the feminist critique of phallocentrism in historical studies, Morrell (1998b:605) argues for a concentration on men by making a distinction between men and masculinity: "The inclusion of women in the study of the past and their recognition of their agency has filled an important lacuna but also has made evident the corresponding gap in knowledge about men. The dominance of men in the public record has obscured the fact that little is known about masculinity." With the distinction intact (men/masculinity) Morrell (1998b), in reviewing various articles, discusses how imperial masculinity encountered the military structures of pre-colonial Zulu society, how Afrikaner masculinity changed with urbanisation, how settler masculinity drew on metropolitan notions of manliness, how African hegemonic masculinity was challenged by missionaries, how rural masculinity interacted with black, urban masculinity, and how youth masculinity emerged as an anti-social force. In this historical sketch, women are basically absent except for brief passing mentions. When women do appear, they are frequently homogenised: "In addition to oppressing women, hegemonic masculinity silences or subordinates other masculinities" (Morrell, 1998b: 608). Women here are classed as a single category with differences in terms of their race, class, sexual orientation or locale of living ignored, whereas the multiplicity of men is foregrounded and given attention.

### **The fragmentation of masculinities: Reasserting the masculine / feminine binary.**

The third way in which pro-feminist masculinities studies may inadvertently fall into the phallocentric trap is by allowing men no escape from masculinity, thereby reasserting the masculine/feminine binary. This is achieved through the fragmentation of masculinities. Robert Connell (1995), one of the theorists from whom many South African writers draw, argues for an array of masculine gender projects, offering four categories of masculinity (hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalised

masculinities). These masculinities involve varying degrees and forms of resistance to or compliance with hegemonic masculinity.

In Morrell (1998a, 1998b, 2001) these are given a local flavour: "In this article, a range of masculinities is identified. Colonialism created new and transformed existing masculinities. Race and class featured prominently in the configuration of these masculinities" (Morrell, 1998b:605).

The list of masculinities referred to in Morrell (1998a, 1998b, 2001) includes African masculinities, white masculinity, subordinate masculinities, subversive masculinities, dominant masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, black masculinity, white, ruling class masculinity, imperial masculinity, tough masculinity, Republican masculinity, Afrikaner masculinity, class-based, oppositional masculinity, settler masculinity, hegemonic (white) masculinities, alternative masculinities, rural masculinity, urban, black masculinity, working class masculinity, black, oppositional masculinity, youth masculinity, convergent masculinity, exemplary masculinity, rival masculinities, minority masculinity, aggressive masculinity, violent masculinity, establishment masculinity, brittle masculinities, new South African masculinity, protest or oppositional masculinity, post-colonial masculinity, gay masculinity, violent masculinities, aggressive masculinities, social masculinity. The problem with this type of taxonomic (or even descriptive) exercise is the possibility for further and further refinements to an infinite regress. Indeed in an endnote Morrell (1998b:626) notes "The great differences between societies in southern Africa will need to be taken into account when refining the concept of African masculinity. The differences, for example, in production and politics between, say, Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu societies warrant careful weighting".

The aim of recognising a multiplicity of masculinities is, in my understanding, to subvert the fixity of masculine subject positions and to recognise and understand the multiple fractures and power relations that occur between men. From a post-structural feminist position, this aim is to be applauded. However, the means presents some difficulties, as it never undoes the masculinity/femininity binary. Fragmentation of the masculine subject position may occur but only if it remains within the framework of masculinities. Indeed it is this very fragmentation that allows for the continued dominance of the masculine signifier and the reassertion of the masculinity/femininity binary (although in disguised form now).

To explain further, because masculinity may mean so many things now, efforts to undermine the discourses and practices of masculinity are cast on slippery ground. Actions aimed at unsaying masculinity are appropriated into a discourse of "alternative" or "subversive" *masculinities*. Morrell (2001:7) states "For gender scholars, the possibility of intervening in the politics of masculinity to promote masculinities that are more peaceful and harmonious ...". And Morrell (1998a:10), "New kinds of masculinities which support a culture of peace, racial and gender equality are not likely to be accepted without public support and the effort of concerned gender organisations and civil society as a whole". And Morrell (1998b:614), "Both authors point to the dangers of characterising all men as misogynist, racist, uncaring or, in short, as simple bearers of hegemonic masculinity. Their writings suggest that the internal inconsistencies of masculinity can generate alternative masculinities".

In these quotes, Morrell intimates the struggle that will be required of the “new man” to engage in a politics of equity. However, this man is inevitably caught within the constraints of masculinity. Masculinities are pitched against each other. Resistance to “hegemonic” masculinity is cast within the same signifying boundaries – masculinity. There is no escape. There is no undoing or unsaying masculinity, merely a shift from one form to another. The “new man’s” masculinity is never undone, but rather mutates into new kinds of masculinities. This elasticity ensures the longevity of the masculinity signifier, bolstering the masculinity/femininity binary.

As “alternative” masculinities struggle against “hegemonic” masculinity, women once again become invisible. What is obscured, in descriptions of this battle of masculinity against masculinities, is the fact that masculinity (of any sort) only has meaning in relation to its absent trace – femininity. In describing men’s subjectivity solely within the bounds of masculinity, these theorists not only re-produce the suppression of the female signifier, driving it further into the recesses of obscurity, but also ensure that the possibility of deconstructing the binary recedes.

### **HOW FEMINISTS FAILED MEN.**

Despite these critiques, I have much sympathy with scholars who wish to study the effects discourses and practices of masculinity have in men’s lives. The problems noted above have arisen, I argue, not because of men’s interest in their gendered subjectivity, but because the theoretical positioning of patriarchy in understanding gender relations is sidelined with masculinity taking on the dominant explanatory position. A simple illustration of this is provided through a count of the terms masculinity, masculine or masculinist versus patriarchy and patriarchal in the three introductions. The former are mentioned 158, 38 and 215 times in Morrell (2001), Morrell (1998a) and Morrell (1998b) respectively and the latter seven, twice and 17 times. This leaves us with an average patriarchy: masculinity ratio of 1:18. Patriarchy, thus, recedes into the background and with it an understanding of gendered power relations, while debates about men and masculinities become foregrounded.

Patriarchy has been a key concept in feminist theorising and political action since the 1970s, denoting gendered relations of power that oppress women. There has been vigorous debate about the usefulness of the term, with some feminist critics arguing that the concept involves ahistorical, transnational generalisations, that it sets all men up as the enemy and all women as victims, that it homogenises women, that its focus on the personal is problematic, and that it is a reductionist and circular concept (Pollert, 1996; Bryson, 1999). Notwithstanding these criticisms, patriarchy continues to occupy a central position in feminist theorising. Proponents of the concept of patriarchy argue that terms such as “gender relations”, “gender order” or even “sexism” do not provide permanent reminders that men rather women are the dominant or privileged group (Bryson, 1999). Within post-structuralist feminism, patriarchy has been employed in an amended form that overcomes the deficiencies noted above. “Patriarchy” becomes a network of patriarchies, with power being viewed in the Foucauldian sense as “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978:94). The historical and contextual contingencies of patriarchal power relations are recognised as well as men’s enmeshment in patriarchal patterns.

I argue, as does Wiegman (2001), that it is methodologically and theoretically important to maintain a distinction between patriarchy and masculinity. Masculinities (or the

masculinization of particular practices) serves the purposes of patriarchy in articulating, institutionalizing and normalizing particular gender relations. Thus masculinity could be seen as one piece of the fluid puzzle that makes up patriarchy. Nystrom (2002:41) calls masculinity “the public relations campaign of patriarchy”. In other words, the construction of masculinity dovetails with other constructions (such as femininity, humanity, motherhood, economised activity, work) to permit or constrain patriarchal gender relations. Patriarchy, thus, is and should remain the theoretically dominant signifier.

However, the concept of patriarchy as taken up by many feminists fails theorists interested in the fractures that occur between men. Indeed, masculinities studies purport to bring something new into the study of gender relations in highlighting the oppression by hegemonic masculinity of masculinities that do not quite fit the mould. For example, Morrell (2001:7) states that “[Connell] showed that while men oppressed women, some men dominated and subordinated other men ... there was a masculinity that was hegemonic – one that dominated other masculinities”.

However, the fact that men may oppress other men was recognised early on by feminists. Millett (1970, cited in Bryson, 1999) in her early exposition of the concept of patriarchy stated that the principles of patriarchy are twofold: men dominate women and older men dominate younger men. This second aspect of patriarchy has, however, not been central to feminist theory. Indeed, some feminists are sceptical of the generational element of the definition of patriarchy, as it “implies a theory of gender inequality in which this aspect of men’s domination over each other is central to men’s domination over women” (Walby, 1990:20). They advocate discarding this (men oppressing men) aspect altogether.

I argue that it is this very oversight of feminist theorising that has led to masculinities studies grappling with the power relations that exist between men (and hence leading to the difficulties noted in this paper). In order to accommodate masculinities studies within a framework of patriarchy that foregrounds gendered relations, the early definition of patriarchy needs to be revisited and debated. The fact that the second aspect of this definition is generational only (i.e. older men oppressing younger ones), thus obfuscating the multitude of fissures along which power relations between men are played out, is problematic. A conceptualisation of patriarchy that can account for these fissures is needed, but, importantly, a conceptualisation that understands these fissures as *always already described and circumscribed in terms of their power relations with women*. This conceptualisation keeps the central problematic of patriarchy in focus but can account for the oppression of men by other men. It also does not mean that patriarchy works in exactly the same way for women and for marginalised men, although there may be overlaps (Renato, 1993).

## **CONCLUSION.**

Morrell (1988b:623) states that an important reason for studying men through the lens of masculinity is “to extend the understanding of how gender is a feature of all social relationships which is part of a quest to understand how inequalities develop and are sustained and how power is wielded”. This clearly is an important goal in terms of the feminist project. However, as I have argued above this aim slips away with masculinities studies inadvertently falling into a phallogocentric trap through concentrating on men and masculinities (thereby inadvertently ignoring or side-lining women) and multiplying the



kinds of masculinities which means that there is no escape from the masculinity signifier. The gendered binary is thereby re-produced and patriarchy as a theoretical signifier becomes sidelined. Feminists must take some blame for this in ignoring or actively opposing the generational aspect of the early definition of patriarchy.

Bhabha (1995:57) states that “It must be our aim not to deny or disavow masculinity, but to disturb its manifest destiny – to draw attention to it as a prosthetic reality – a “prefixing” of the rules of gender and sexuality”. It is this paradox that needs to be addressed in feminist and pro-feminist work – acknowledging the effects discourses and practices of masculinities (that are always already inscribed within patriarchal power relations) have in men’s lives, while, at the same time, disrupting their inevitability. This requires, in the first instance, a revision of the concept of patriarchy in such a way as to accommodate the multiple fissures in power relations between men in relation to the absent signifier, women. Secondly, it requires a deconstruction of masculinities, rather than a shift from one form to another.

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